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Author(s): Camden Burd

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Scrolling through Nature: Reflections on the Digital Humanities and Michigan's Environmental History

By

Camden Burd

It may seem odd for an article examining “the digital” to appear in an environmental-history issue of *The Michigan Historical Review*. For many readers, the very notion of “the digital” runs contrary to ideas of the natural world. Such a reaction is justified, given that modern Americans often juxtapose digital experiences with the “real thing.”¹ We pit forests against cellphones and streams against screens. Yet the cultural distinction between “the natural” and “the digital” says more about Americans’ tenuous relationship with modernity than the actual laws of nature. After all, the same electrons that power computers, phones, and tablets can be found in all aspects of nature. In truth, if we push beyond the knee-jerk contempt for technology, we begin to see how these tools can expand our understanding of the natural world. New digital tools and increased access to information via the internet provide scholars and librarians avenues for research, publication, and the dissemination of knowledge. In turn, time spent wandering the internet offers insights into all aspects of the past—including Michigan’s environmental history. In this article, I hope to make a case for the digital humanities and its practitioners. In doing so, I reflect upon the ways in which scholars harnessed digital tools to research, inform, and illuminate aspects of the state’s environmental history. By scrolling through digital repositories, scholarship, and projects, I will defend “the digital” for its research capabilities and its demonstrated track record to disseminate compelling environmental histories.

What are the digital humanities? Within the field, scholars continue to discuss, debate, and identify the tools and practices that define the digital humanities. These conversations result from the field’s unique

¹ For a book that epitomizes the critique against the television and digital experiences, see Bill McKibben, *The Age of Missing Information* (New York: Random House, 1992); for a compelling piece on television and nature, see Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

genealogy that grew from humanities computing, to eHumanities, and ultimately to a term broadly labeled as “digital humanities.” Each name change reflected an advance in technology or a new wave of scholars asking innovative questions.² The resulting field today carries the metaphorical label as a “big tent.”³ Due to the many offshoots, interests, and discipline-specific questions that exist within this tent, leaders of the field err on the side of ambiguity rather than a single, definitive definition. As a result, most scholars describe the digital humanities in loose terms as a methodology or discipline that utilizes digital tools to ask new research questions, formulate innovative arguments, and share findings to larger and more diverse audiences. Those individuals who build websites, crunch data, analyze text, create video games, map with Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and create electronic literature all happily define themselves as digital humanists.

The digital humanities are expansive and interdisciplinary. Due to the technical nature of the work, several collaborators across the academy and public coordinate to imagine, design, and create digital resources. Archivists, librarians, historians, and computer programmers work together to create new research or document and disseminate information to wider audiences. Their cohesion, as loose as it is, makes sense for those scholars and practitioners inside the tent despite the critiques or confusion felt by those looking in.⁴

Although the increased accessibility to digitized historical materials and scholarship offers those viewers limited by geography greater access to archival materials, the use of digital tools undoubtedly has its limitations. Building compelling and effective digital humanities projects often requires a great deal of institutional

² For a brief overview of the history of the field, see Julianne Nyhan, Melissa Taurus, and Edward Vanhoutte, “Introduction,” in *Defining Digital Humanities: A Reader*, ed. Julianne Nyhan, Melissa Taurus, and Edward Vanhoutte (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), 1-10.

³ Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold, “Digital Humanities: The Expanded Field,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), ix-xv.

⁴ Critiques against the digital humanities range from criticisms of technology to philosophical opposition to the “neoliberal university.” For a brief overview of those critiques, see Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia, “Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of the Digital Humanities,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 1, 2016, www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/neoliberal-tools-archives-political-history-digital-humanities; Timothy Brennan, “The Digital Humanities Bust,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 15, 2017, www.chronicle.com/article/The-Digital-Humanities-Bust/241424.

support. Unfortunately, humanities departments with depleted budgets are understandably hesitant, or unable, to dedicate the necessary time or funds necessary to curate and create digital projects. In that sense, the growth of the digital humanities further accentuates a schism between institutions able to support the endeavor and those whose budgets cannot.⁵ That is not to say that historical information can only be “digitized” with government or foundation grants. No, the internet is littered with websites claiming to share historical information. Users should always be critical of the material found on the internet that might be masquerading as scholarly work. Often to the disservice of the user, information published on the internet can carry the façade of academic rigor without footnotes, records of institutional partners, or appropriate credits to the parties involved in the creation of a digital resource. Not every piece of historical information made available on the internet is, nor should be considered, equal. Users must be held responsible to examine and critique a digital resource based on the source of its materials as well as the institutions and individuals that constructed it. Alternatively, the curators and creators of academic digital work must strive to provide accurate citations, information about contributors, as well as a level of transparency about the historical and technical processes that led to the creation of the digital resource.⁶

These issues are particularly important given the rapid growth of the digital humanities in recent decades. Although the roots of the digital humanities began as early as the 1970s, the latest expansion of the field can be attributed to the commercial success of the World Wide Web in the 1990s and 2000s. During this period, several companies created accessible content management systems to simplify the process of building web-based digital content. Whether for personal blogs or digital repositories, the transition to Web 2.0 provided users multiple platforms to operate a blog or build a website. With manageable tools to build and sustain websites, universities increasingly flirted with the academic possibilities of new digital tools.

⁵ Christine L. Borgman, “The Digital Future is Now: A Call to Action for the Humanities,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (2009): www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/4/000077/000077.html.

⁶ Fred Gibbs and Trevor Owens, “Building Better Digital Humanities Tools: Toward Broader Audiences and User-Centered Designs,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (2012): www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/6/2/000136/000136.html.



William Nara, 14, trapper in Bootjack

Source: Nara Collection, Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, Houghton

Some of the earliest sustained efforts to promote digital accessibility developed from University Archives.⁷

Several universities in Michigan digitized and published robust collections of images that showcase industrial, agricultural, urban, and rural pasts. Viewers can readily access images of farm life, city living, factory work, and suburban developments currently scattered across several

⁷ Jonathan Senchyne, “Between Knowledge and Metaknowledge: Shifting Disciplinary Borders in Digital Humanities and Library and Information Systems,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 368-376.

repositories. For example, the Copper Country Historical Images database, managed and maintained by Michigan Technological University Archives, offers a wide array of images relating to logging, mining, hunting, and conservation in the region.⁸ The digital images provide visitors with visual evidence of past environmental practices and prompt onlookers to imagine the changing relationship between humans and nature over time. The database features several digitized images, but those from the J. W. Nara Collection are particularly compelling. Nara, a photographer who lived in Calumet, captured images of workers, strikers, hunters, and family life.

Many of the photographs feature individuals interacting with their local environments, whether it be mining, skiing, or showing off trophies from the day's hunt. Nara's landscape photography provides a glimpse of the urban-like life of Calumet and Houghton that no longer exists due to economic decline and diminished mining activity. Farther to the south, Western Michigan University Libraries digitized and published a portion of the Ward Morgan Photography Collection. The collection provides materials relating to industry and work life throughout the twentieth century as it relates to Southwest Michigan.⁹ Wayne State University offers nearly 50,000 images relating to life in Southeast Michigan—many of which feature industry and urban life.¹⁰ Digitized images provide a lens into the past and offer onlookers the opportunity to imagine past environmental practices as well as relationships with the natural world.

Not long after the digitization of images, archivists and librarians published other types of media relating to aspects of Michigan's environmental history.¹¹ The Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company Historical Records Digitization Project represents an early, large-scale digital humanities undertaking.¹² With financial aid from a Digitizing Historical Records Grant from the National Historical Publications & Records

⁸ "Copper County Historical Images," Michigan Technological University, accessed March 26, 2018, <https://cchi.mtu.edu>.

⁹ "Ward Morgan Photography, Southwest Michigan 1939-1980," Western Michigan University Libraries, accessed March 26, 2018, <https://cdm16259.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p124301coll2>.

¹⁰ "Digital Collections," Wayne State University Libraries, accessed March 26, 2018, <https://digital.library.wayne.edu>.

¹¹ Audio materials are published as well, see "Oral History Collections of the Upper Peninsula," Northern Michigan University, accessed March 26, 2018, https://archives.nmu.edu/oral_history.

¹² "The Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company Historical Records Digitization Project," Central Upper Peninsula & Northern Michigan University Archives, accessed March 26, 2018, <http://archives.nmu.edu/ccl>.



National Gypsum Company, factory, exterior

Source: Ward Morgan Photography Collection, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo

Commission in 2010, staff from Central Upper Peninsula and Northern Michigan University Archives published nearly 70,000 historical documents related to the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company. Operating in various forms since 1846, the company is one of the most significant actors to shape the economic and environmental landscape of Michigan.¹³ The project features business records spanning from 1893 to 1960, including lumber, mining, and land dealings. Annual reports, maps, business records, land and lumber use records, and documentation about the labor force are just a few of the materials that document the history of the company. Although tedious to navigate, the project is rich with material for those interested in the environmental history of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Those who take the time to explore the digital archive

¹³ For a broader history of the company, see Terry S. Reynolds and Virginia P. Dawson, *Iron Will: Cleveland-Cliffs and the Mining of Iron Ore, 1847-2006* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2011).

will be rewarded with a depth of information that had only been accessible to those able to visit the archives in Marquette.

Projects that focused on images of text soon transitioned into dynamic electronic documents with the advent of optical character recognition (OCR). Although restricted to typed sources, OCR translates typed characters from typewriters and computers into electronic text so that what were once static words on a page become machine-readable. OCR technologies allowed archivists to translate government documents, typed letters, novels, poems, and memos into searchable text. Over the past decades, the Clarke Historical Library at Central Michigan University has used digital preservation technologies and OCR to convert historic newspapers from microfilm into dynamic, digital formats. From the *L'Anse Sentinel* in Baraga County to the *Detroit Tribune*, the Digital Michigan Newspapers project rewards anyone willing to dig deep into this vast collection.¹⁴ News of floods, droughts, fires, and agricultural prices and practices are littered throughout the collection. The project does not cover all portions of the state, and those looking for newspapers from the Upper Peninsula will struggle to find regional representation. To remedy this problem, the project directors offer links to the Chronicling America database maintained by the Library of Congress.¹⁵ The combined records make for a rich collection of Michigan's historical record—records that can be searched dynamically across time and space with just a few keystrokes.

Librarians' efforts to cultivate the digital humanists soon encouraged a larger surge of scholars interested by technology as a tool for research and publication. Historians, perhaps more so than any other discipline, championed the public-facing opportunities allowed by new digital tools.¹⁶ As early as the 1990s, historians driven by the democratizing powers of the World Wide Web began to contextualize the sites and digital repositories based on the physical collections housed in archives and libraries. They wrote and designed educational tools for teachers that could be accessed within a few clicks. Gauging their early efforts, most

¹⁴ "Digital Michigan Newspapers," Central Michigan University, accessed March 26, 2018, <https://digmichnews.cmich.edu>.

¹⁵ "Digital Michigan Newspaper Portal," Clarke Historical Library, accessed March 26, 2018, <https://www.cmich.edu/library/clarke/Pages/Michigan-Digital-Newspaper-Portal.aspx>.

¹⁶ Will Fenton, "The Digital Humanities as Public Humanities," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 29, 2018, www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/01/29/literary-scholars-should-use-digital-humanities-reach-of-ignored-public-opinion.

digital historians of the 1990s and 2000s took to the Web as an extension of public history.¹⁷ They focused their efforts to provide context, introduce narratives, or offer insights on aspects of the past. Today, scholars continue to see promise in the digital humanities, and many offer their research in public-facing projects to ensure that wider audiences might access thoughtful and engaging environmental histories.

Those historians compelled to share their scholarship with larger audiences use multiple platforms such as personal websites, blogs, and eBooks. This form of the digital humanities expands upon traditional forms of scholarship such as articles and books. Utilizing the connectivity of the internet, scholars ensure that their research will be available to wider audiences. For example, the History Department at Northern Michigan University created *Upper Country*—a digitally born journal designed to study the people and cultures of the Lake Superior region. The editors of *Upper Country* publish varying articles across the disciplines including “history, anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, geography, education, literature, photography and other intellectual pursuits.”¹⁸ While not explicitly focused on environmental history, *Upper Country* presumes the importance of the regional landscape in shaping all facets of life, from politics to the economy; religion to architecture; and sports to folk traditions. Additionally, several university presses provide e-book versions of print books—often at no cost. For example, *Border Flows: A Century of the Canadian-American Water Relationship*, published in 2016 by the University of Calgary Press, provides insightful essays from Lynne Heasley, Daniel Macfarlane, and Nancy Langston to any reader able to connect to their website.¹⁹ Online publication allows historians to offer a traditional form of scholarship through digital means.

Despite the successes of some libraries and scholars to make materials accessible due to the internet and online publishing, fewer scholars push the boundaries of traditional scholarship when envisioning the capabilities of the digital humanities. While it is admirable to digitize and publish images, documents, and published text, digital tools offer

¹⁷ Stephen Robertson, “The Differences Between Digital Humanities and Digital History,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 289-307.

¹⁸ *Upper Country: A Journal of Lake Superior Region*, accessed March 26, 2018, https://commons.nmu.edu/upper_country/.

¹⁹ Lynne Heasley and Daniel Macfarlane, *Border Flows: A Century of the Canadian-American Water Relationship* (Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2016), <http://press.ucalgary.ca/books/9781552388952>.

entirely new ways to make arguments, present information, or engage with audiences. Multi-modal digital projects can be immersive and compelling because the use of digital humanities allows practitioners to combine data visualizations, audio, video, and GIS maps to document all aspects of Michigan's history—including the environment. There are signs of growth. Nancy Langston incorporates GIS into the classroom at Michigan Technological University and encourages students to present their research using interactive Story Maps.²⁰ A project titled "Great Lakes Water to the Golden State?" weaves historical research, high-resolution images, and data-rich maps into a narrative that examines the connected water debates between the Great Lakes basin and drought in the American West.²¹

Similarly, the Beaumier Upper Peninsula Heritage Center at Northern Michigan University announced new "online exhibits" as an extension of organization to expand their reach beyond the traditional museum space. Through an interactive map and multiple histories, "Remnants: Ghost Towns of the Upper Peninsula" documents the environmental impacts of mining and lumbering through fifteen ghost towns in the Upper Peninsula.²² In my own work, "Mapping the 'Land of Hiawatha,'" I use GIS technology to demonstrate how Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* shaped many of Michigan's cultural and environmental landscapes.²³ Blending geographic data, humanistic inquiry, and historical research, "Mapping the 'Land of Hiawatha'" demonstrates the interdisciplinary possibilities of new technologies. All of these projects demonstrate how the digital humanities allow a new flexibility to share environmental history. No longer restricted to the rigid structure of traditional print scholarship, digital humanities projects offer different approaches to learn, teach, engage, and share historical research.

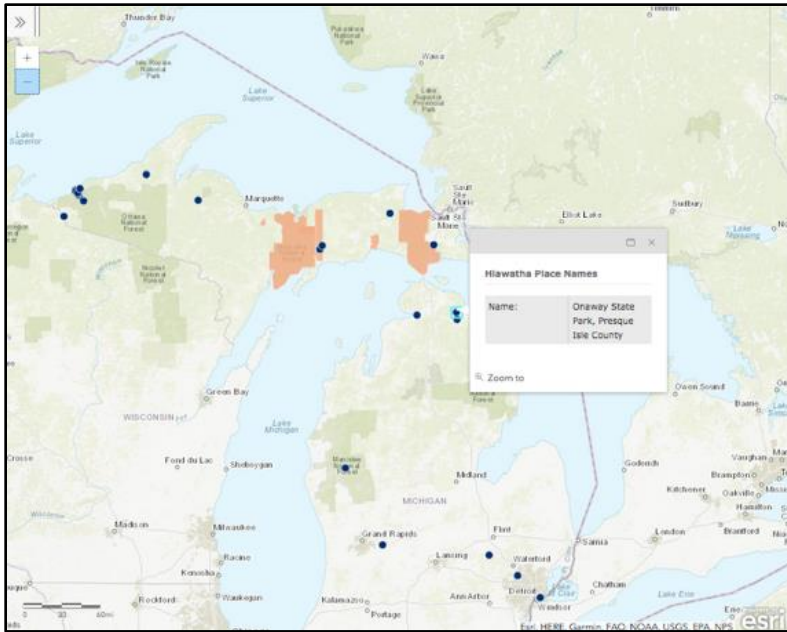
Encouraged by the possibilities of the digital humanities, Michigan State University introduced a series of programs and initiatives to foster the digital projects from faculty and students. Both Matrix, the Center for the Digital Humanities and Social Sciences and the Lab for the Education

²⁰ "Digital Pedagogies," Nancy Langston, accessed March 26, 2018, www.nancylangston.net/digital-pedagogies.

²¹ Alex Bergquist, Kristin Lowery, and Christian Pirie, "Great Lakes Water to the Golden State?" accessed March 26, 2018, <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=4b7cd8efebce4ed3b3d0fed6c0930ec1>.

²² "Remnants: Ghost Towns of the U.P.," Northern Michigan University Beaumier Upper Peninsula Heritage Center, accessed March 26, 2018, archives.nmu.edu/beaumier/ghosttowns.

²³ Camden Burd, "Mapping the 'Land of Hiawatha,'" accessed August 20, 2018, <http://www.camdenburd.com/hiawatha>.



Screenshot from “Mapping the ‘Land of Hiawatha’”

Source: www.camdenburd.com/hiawatha

and Advancement in Digital Research (LEADR) at Michigan State University serve an example for American institutions that want to encourage digital history projects.²⁴ While the Matrix houses multiple large-scale digital humanities projects (none focused on Michigan history), LEADR offers a series of short, yet interesting and compelling environmental history projects designed and produced by university students. The digital history projects range from the commodification of beaver to historical vignettes of several Michigan towns and cities.²⁵

²⁴ “Matrix,” College of Social Science, Michigan State, accessed March 26, 2018, www.matrix.msu.edu/; “About,” Lab for the Education and Advancement in Digital Research, Michigan State University, accessed March 26, 2018, leadr.msu.edu.

²⁵ Jonathan Chacko, “Commodification of the Beaver in the Great Lakes and Hudson Bay Regions from 1550-1750,” Lab for the Education and Advancement in Digital Research, Michigan State University, accessed March 26, 2018, cdn.knightlab.com/libs/timeline3/latest/embed/index.html?source=1H1UyDfcDQAgU Rdqgn4YSEnuTuO-R9v8wq2psLTcSEEg; “Michigan History,” Lab for the Education and Advancement in Digital Research, Michigan State University, accessed March 26, 2018, michiganhistory.leadr.msu.edu.

Although many of these initiatives are relatively new, MSU is positioning itself to be a leader in the field of digital humanities by creating compelling digital projects that incorporate audio, data visualizations, historic timelines, and interactive maps.

Despite critics' assertions against "digital" experiences, few digital humanists claim to subvert the "real thing." No matter how long someone spends scrolling through curated images of mining sites, industrial wastelands, urban decay, or suburban sprawl, they cannot replace seeing or experiencing those places in person. Though I would never discourage anyone from traversing Michigan's diverse landscapes, I suggest that much of the state's environmental history can best be understood through the laborious efforts of librarians, archivists, and historians to curate and create digital experiences. Whether through repositories of historic manuscripts, web-based publications, or immersive projects, today's digital humanists ensure that the record of Michigan's environmental history is accessible and engaging. After all, that is the inherent promise of the digital humanities. Recognizing that Michigan's landscape can change due to the laws of nature or the cultural and economic whims of its residents, it seems that scrolling through nature might provide an ideal lens to document and remember the state's environmental history.